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**The Role of the Urban League Movement
in Overcoming Inner-City Poverty:
Challenges for the 21st Century**

by
Hugh B. Price

1995

This Occasional Paper is based on a keynote address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts held in Boston on December 1, 1994. Mr. Hugh B. Price is President and CEO of the National Urban League, Inc.

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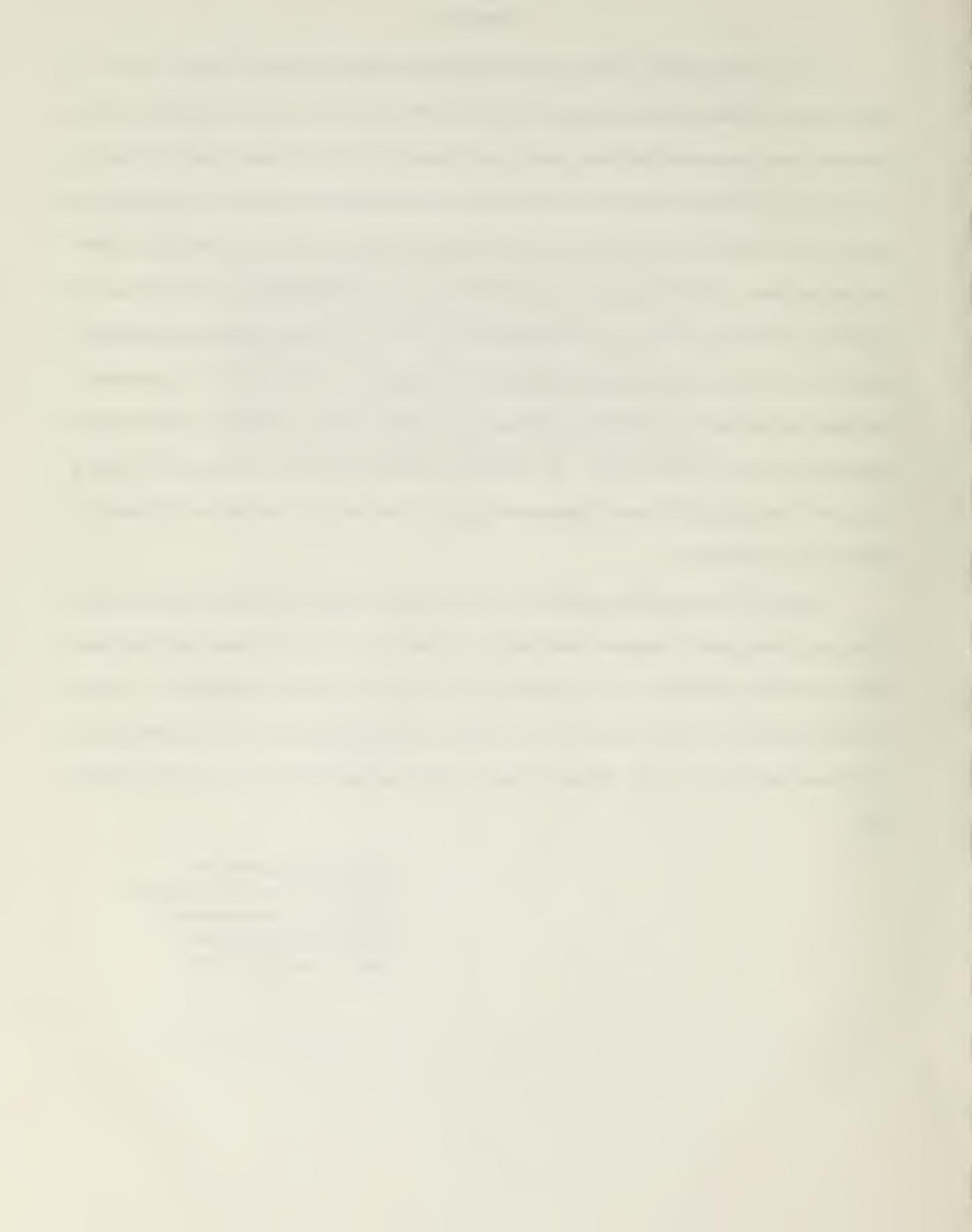
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Foreword

This Occasional Paper is based on a keynote address delivered by Mr. Hugh B. Price to the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts in December 1994. Mr. Price noted that although African Americans have made some significant gains in social, economic and educational arenas following the Civil Rights era, the black community continues to face discrimination in housing, employment, and education. He proposed that while civil rights organizations should concentrate on combatting racism and discrimination, their primary agenda must also focus on overcoming inner-city poverty that is so rampant in the black community. He recommended two ways in which this can be accomplished: through the education and development of children in the inner-city; and, secondly, the promoting of "economic self-sufficiency" in the black community as a means of helping individuals in disadvantaged situations become more "mainstream." We would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Hugh B. Price, the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts and its President, Dr. Joan Wallace Benjamin, for facilitating this publication.

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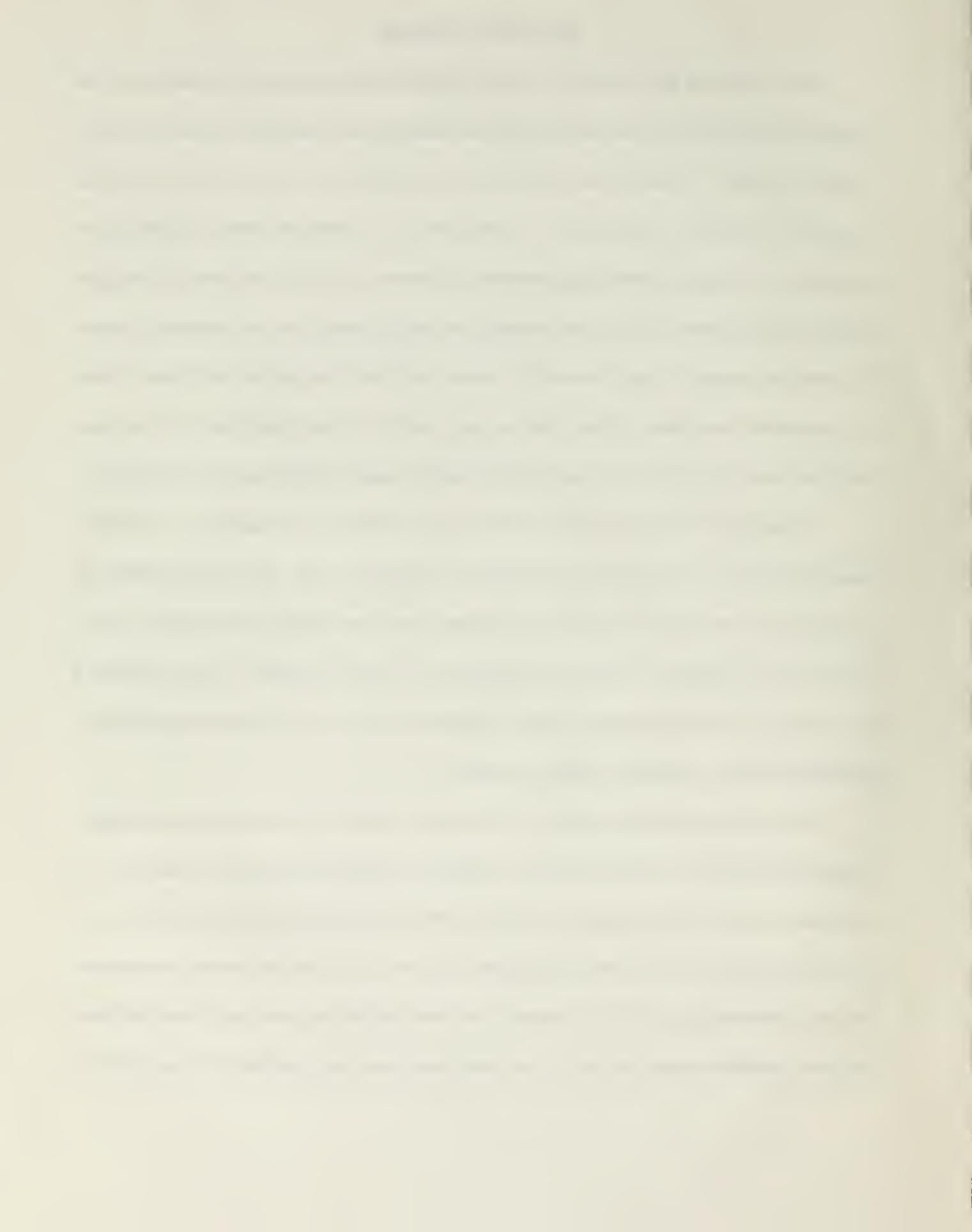


KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Before charting the course of the Urban League movement through the remainder of this century and into the next, let me briefly describe the changing and challenging seas that we will be navigating together. We all live in a world which bears little resemblance to that of a mere half decade ago, much less a generation ago. Communism has crumbled and market economies now reign supreme. Nations are redefining themselves with stunning rapidity. Immigrants and refugees stream almost unchecked across borders, radically and rapidly altering the ethnic makeup of nations. This ruthlessly competitive world waits for no nation, no ethnic group, and no individual. Should any competitor falter, there is always an emerging country, an enterprising people, or an eager immigrant waiting in the wings or, more likely, already seizing the opportunity to fill the void.

Technological change, corporate “right-sizing,” industrial out-migration and structural unemployment are now familiar phrases throughout the developed world. Statistically speaking, the unemployment problems of Canada, France, Germany, and Great Britain are twice as bad as ours. Closer to home, America is enduring its own economic and social upheavals. Lest we overlook it in our despair over urban conditions today, the plain fact is that the Civil Rights Movement was a smashing success for millions of African Americans.

Blacks, blessed with strong family and community support, solid education and social skills, personal drive and a dose of good luck, have surged into the social and economic mainstream. The racial composition on college campuses and in corporations has changed radically in the forty years since the celebrated *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Even so, racism remains an undeniable and well-documented fact of life. For instance, the Urban Institute has sent equally qualified black and white candidates to apply for jobs. Their studies have shown that black applicants routinely fare

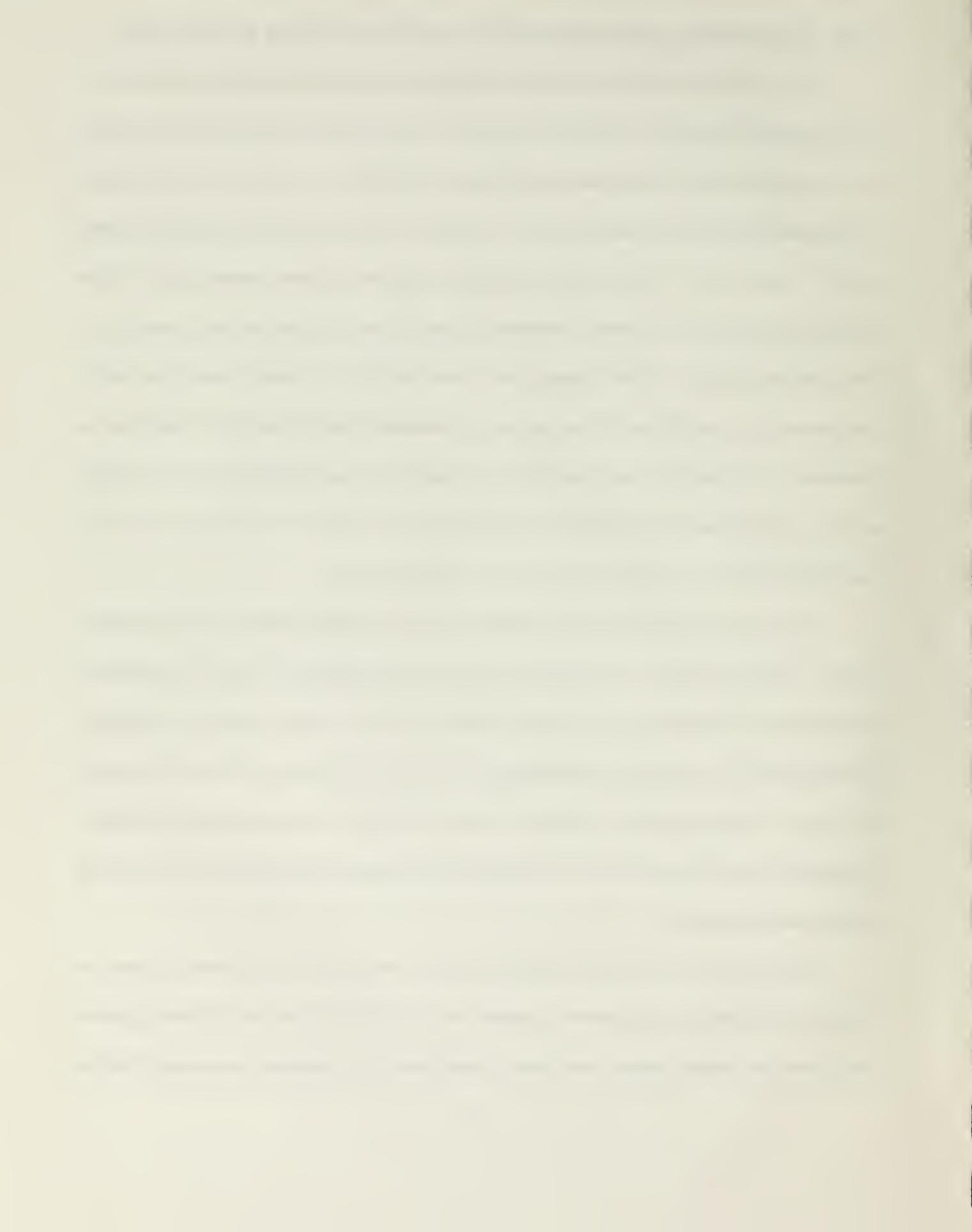


worse. Though subtler now, discrimination still occurs in housing, lending, and employment.

Then, there are the inflammatory incidents like the Rodney King beating and of the less notorious flare-ups between policemen and our people. And thanks to those incessant images on local evening newscasts of young blacks being hauled off to jail, even our honor students complain of being trailed like common thieves when they enter stores. Thus, the job of exposing and defeating racism is hardly done. That remains the urgent—and still relevant—work of civil rights organizations like ours. Yet, there is a companion agenda for our organizations that, if anything, is even more compelling. That's the pressing need to overcome inner-city poverty among our people, and other ethnic groups, before their despair deepens irreversibly and the quality of urban life erodes irretrievably. Conditions in many cities across the country hover on the brink of no return. Though millions of blacks have ridden the “up” escalator since *Brown*, millions of us with meager skills and poor schooling have been stuck on the “down” economic escalator.

Blue collar workers were once the backbone of the American economy and widely celebrated as such. Today, the advent of technology and the global realignment of work and wealth have redefined the economic function of cities and destroyed the decent paying livelihoods of marginally skilled workers. Their jobs have been replaced, if at all, by service industry positions paying poverty level wages. The ensuing impact on family economic and social stability, personal responsibility, male pride in oneself as a provider, and neighborhood vitality, among other familiar pathologies, has simply been devastating.

The fate of our people who are stuck on the down escalator must be the primary focus of the Urban League Movement. This renewed emphasis on our sisters, brothers and children in greatest need honors our original mission, which was to serve those of us in meager circumstances who are



seeking access to mainstream society. How should we pursue this ambitious goal? Given our limited resources, we must focus on those critical areas where we can leverage our unique strengths for greatest impact. I see the following areas of concentration for the Urban League: (1) the education and social development of our children who are growing up in the inner-city so that they can acquire the necessary academic and social skills to be successful; and (2) the promoting of economic self-sufficiency that can enable our people to fully participate in mainstream society. Now, those are big tasks. But, let me elaborate on how we, at the National Urban League and the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, can tackle aspects of these tasks.

Education and Social Development

A top priority has to be the preparation of our children for the 21st century. How easy it is to forget, in the flood of awful articles and newscasts about youth violence, that our children are our future. Children growing up in the inner-city are being cheated of many supports that are crucial for their success in society. The Urban League aims to do something about two of them—education and social development.

There is little mystery about how to do a better job of educating poor children. School reformers like James Comer, Jeff Howard, Bob Slavin and Ted Sizer, and dedicated teachers across the country, have shown convincingly that it can be done. Among the key ingredients are high expectations; challenging academic material; and flexible, engaging instructional techniques. Unfortunately, effective teaching and learning for poor children occurs mostly in isolated classrooms led by motivated teachers. It seldom permeates entire schools and school districts. That's largely because districts are still not genuinely committed to reform or prepared to invest adequately in

retooling teachers and principals to take it on in earnest.

What's missing, therefore, is not the way to change, but the will to make the changes. It will take concerted outside pressure from parents and community groups to prevail upon school systems to improve the education of inner-city children. That's precisely where the Urban League comes in. I see us mobilizing and equipping parents and community leaders to become more sophisticated and insistent consumers of education for their children. Let us go neighborhood by neighborhood, living room by living room in the inner-city communities we serve. Let us help parents understand, in layman's terms, exactly what their children must know and be able to do in order to meet the standards of competency as we enter the 21st century. If their children are off-course, we need to encourage the parents to inquire, constructively yet insistently, exactly what the teachers intend to do about it, by when, and what they, the parents, can do concretely to be supportive.

Let us focus especially on the early years to try to prevent the fall-off in academic achievement which tends to occur starting around the third or fourth grade. We need to overcome the ambivalence that many of our children have about academic achievement. It is a tragedy and a waste that our brightest children often try to hide their success, and those who can do well in school don't even try because they're afraid of being jeered by their classmates. As one youngster put it, "The best way to avoid trouble is to never get all the answers right on a test."

The academic excellence we want our kids to achieve is tied to attitudes and social development, much of which takes place in the home, of course, but also in extracurricular programs, settlement houses, Girls and Boys Clubs, and organized sports. Ideally, this is where positive social development of children occurs, where their values are shaped, where they learn to collaborate with others in teams, where they learn social graces, and where they are exposed to new horizons through

visits to museums and so forth. That's the theory, anyway. The trouble is that in all too many inner-city neighborhoods, this so-called developmental infrastructure has virtually vanished. Many parents these days, especially single mothers, are stringing together several low-wage jobs just to get by. They simply are not home in mid-afternoon when their children arrive from school.

Most urban school systems are too strapped financially to provide the rich array of extracurricular clubs that most of us enjoyed as teenagers. Many inner-city settlement houses, assuming they are still on the scene, are too underfunded and dilapidated physically to provide safe havens and constructive activities for all the children who need them. Municipal park and recreation departments are but a shadow of their former selves. But, let me tell you who is well-financed and omnipresent: Gangs that are growing everywhere. These gangs have filled the void left by supposedly responsible adults and have built their own anti-social infrastructure ensnaring youngsters in search of identity and companionship.

Politicians talk incessantly these days about taking back the streets from criminals. I say we take back our children from the streets and from the gangs, and the streets will take care of themselves. It's high time that society at large and, especially, we of the African American community, muster the will and the wherewithal to ensure that each inner-city child who needs attention, support and direction has a caring adult in his or her life every day. We, African Americans who have made it, must tithe for their time and, more importantly, our money to see to it that those of our children whom the Civil Rights Movement has not yet touched also have a real chance to succeed.

That is why I have proposed that each Urban League affiliate mount a campaign to place caring adults in the lives of all inner-city youngsters. Where would the resources come from? From

contributions by our well-heeled young professionals who don't yet have family obligations. From older folks like me—the post-tuition, pre-retirement generation—whose children are now out of college. From everyone else who can afford to give. From those who cannot, but are willing to stage fund raisers instead. From groups like the Elks and the Frats. From people who can commit the time to be mentors, if not the money to pay for them. I have been encouraged by the positive feedback that I have received from many individuals and groups who have agreed to give their support. As you can imagine, a program of such magnitude requires very careful planning and assessment. We have been gathering ideas and data, and the entire Urban League Movement is involved in the planning process.

Promoting Economically Self-Sufficient Individuals and Families

Along with the priority on the education and development of our children, we of the Urban League are dedicated to helping individuals and families become economically self-sufficient. That's why I am impressed by the commitment of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts to become the preeminent resource for employment, education and training for our young adults. Your Urban League's programs stress youth education and development, and now you're building on that firm base with the Urban League's Employment Resource Center which will train, prepare, and place our young adults in jobs.

This is not just another training program because your Urban League has done its homework. It has identified the basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities people need to be successful. Tomorrow's jobs—and so many of today's—demand strong interpersonal and problem-solving skills, solid time and activity management, and effective supervision of others. Those attributes are

what employers are looking for, whether they are in manufacturing or in services. And those are the skills which the participants in the Employment Resource Center will get, along with the technical skills required by specific jobs.

This is a very promising and hopeful initiative that can fulfill two very important objectives. It will help our most vulnerable young adults to achieve the economic self-sufficiency that enables them to support families and build successful careers. And it will help employers to develop the diverse, competent workforces they need to reach their objectives in a fast-changing global economy. It's an exciting prospect, and I urge that the foundation and business communities support it to the hilt. The Employment Resource Center is a unique opportunity for a strategic alliance between the Urban League and private and non-profit sponsors. It can help make the Boston area a national leader, demonstrating how cooperative efforts can help poor people achieve self-sufficiency and how employers can achieve a 21st century workforce.

The energy and commitment I have seen here are replicated in Urban Leagues all across the country. I have been impressed by the “can-do” spirit and commitment to our people that is evidenced throughout the movement. We are placing heavy emphasis on restoring individual and group responsibility. We at the Urban League must work with our folks to ensure that we take family obligations, child rearing, education, self-reliance, and citizenship seriously. But society must uphold its end of the bargain. What use is talk of opportunity when poor people see so little of it? Society must do its part to ensure that self-reliance, with dignity and a decent standard of living, is an everyday reality instead of empty rhetoric.

To pursue this ambitious agenda the Urban League must be transformed into a “state of the art” organization that is well-equipped for the 21st century. This means moving beyond serving

hundreds of people well, to seeing to it that hundred times that many are served. To do so, we must build a local and national capacity for research and policy analysis, coupled with an understanding of organizing, advocacy, and social marketing. If the Urban League is to ratchet up the impact of its work for our people and thus contribute measurably to improving the quality of urban life for all, then those who have been our friends must partner with us as we take our work to a new plateau.

